

## ***FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** October 17, 2018

**Agenda Item:** White Deer Meadows Conservation Easement (R3)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 minutes

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### **Background and Proposed Action:**

The Fish and Wildlife Commission endorsed the “Millage Conservation Easement” in October 2016, which has been renamed White Deer Meadows Conservation Easement due to a change in ownership. The property involves approximately 405 acres of private land north of Bozeman in the Bridger Mountain foothills. This proposed conservation easement would serve to maintain critical mule deer winter range (the historic Northwest Slope of the Bridger Mountains deer herd) and important habitat for elk, white-tailed deer, black bears, mountain lions, upland birds, and a variety of nongame wildlife. The property is a mosaic of deciduous shrubland, sagebrush steppe, conifer-dominated forest, montane native grassland, and riparian areas (~240 acres) with ~160 acres of agricultural fields. The property is bordered by U.S. Forest Service land to the east, a private ranch with an FWP easement to the south, and a private ranch with a Gallatin Valley Land Trust easement to the north. The proposed easement would unify three parcels into one and would restrict development to a 10-acre building envelope. The proposed easement would protect native upland and riparian habitats and would include a requirement to follow FWP’s grazing standards. The proposed easement would secure access for up to three hunting parties per day during general hunting seasons (approximately 170 hunter-days per year) to portions of this private land as well as difficult-to-reach adjacent public lands. The conservation easement has been appraised and valued at \$1,862,000. The landowner intends to donate \$100,000 of value, reducing FWP’s cost to \$1,762,000.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results:**

A draft environmental assessment was distributed to the public August 29, 2018, for a 30-day comment period. Legal notices were sent to local media, posted on the FWP webpage, and sent via e-mail by the area wildlife biologist to a diverse list of approximately 150 interested parties. A public meeting was held September 11, 2018. Public comment included five comments in favor of FWP purchasing the easement for wildlife habitat, hunter access, and to prevent development on the land. One commenter was opposed due to the cost of the easement and given current zoning regulations.

### **Alternatives and Analysis:**

Alternative A: No action - FWP would not purchase a conservation easement on the property. The owners may seek another easement buyer or may not place the property into conservation easement at all. Public access to the property may not be allowed. Future owners could subdivide and develop the property.

Alternative B: MFWP purchases a 405-acre conservation easement on the property. The easement would prevent future subdivision, enable public hunting access to a portion of the property, and would help to conserve habitat values.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale:**

FWP recommends the commission approve purchase of this conservation easement. This easement would improve and maintain valuable habitat for the benefit of wildlife and the public.

### **Proposed Motion:**

I move the commission approve the purchase of the White Deer Meadows Conservation Easement.